

A Debate on the Existence of God: Greg Bahnsen vs. George Smith¹

Moderator: God. Well, the Bible begins with—"In the beginning God!" and the Bible says twice in the Psalms, "The fool has said in his heart there is no God!" But why are there so many agnostics and atheists if God's existence is so evident? There may be many explanations, but there are certain arguments consistently raised by skeptics which call into question God's existence. Coming up we'll discuss atheism and the case against God with atheist George Smith and Christian apologist Greg Bahnsen. My guest, George Smith, has written two books. One is entitled *Atheism: The Case Against God*; the other, *Atheism, Ayn Rand, and Other Heresies*. George first published *Atheism: The Case Against God* in 1974. The book is still in print published by Prometheus. For six years he was a general editor and scriptwriter for the Audio Classics audio tapes by Knowledge Products, currently senior research fellow for the Institute for Human Studies at George Mason University, and again his latest book *Atheism, Ayn Rand, and Other Heresies*. George Smith, we welcome you to the program.

Smith: Thank you.

Moderator: Let me get you to get a little closer to the mic there, George.

Moderator: Also, we have Dr. Greg Bahnsen, presently scholar in residence at the [now defunct] Southern California Center for Christian Studies, an author of five books and nearly a hundred journal or periodical articles in Christian apologetics, ethics, and theology. His doctorate is in philosophy . . . from the University of Southern California, and he has degrees from Westminster Theological Seminary. Dr. Greg Bahnsen, we welcome you as well.

Bahnsen: Thanks, John, good to be here.

Moderator: Well, let's start with George Smith—the status quo is [belief in the] existence of God. Most people would believe in that so since you are opting to challenge the status quo, let's start with your background, George, in the case against God, give us your background. Why don't you believe there is a God?

Smith: Well, first of all, let's be clear about what the definition of "atheism" is as used by most atheists. Atheism is definitely the absence or lack of belief in a god, so after the question: Do you believe in a god? To answer "No" is to make you an atheist. I don't believe in God primarily because I don't see any good reason why I should. In other words, the burden of proof in my mind clearly falls on the theist or the God-believer first to define what he's talking about when he's using the term "God," and secondly, then, to provide arguments or proof of some kind that such a being exists.

Moderator: And what type of proof are we talking about, apodictic certainty? Are you talking about the preponderance of evidence? What would you accept as sufficient proof to have you change your point of view?

¹ Transcript downloaded from the website of Anthony G. Flood at <https://anthonygflood.com/2020/06/a-debate-on-the-existence-of-god-greg-bahnsen-vs-george-smith-1991/>, accessed 05/30/25. See Flood's accounting of his acquiring the transcript and other editorial comments about this version.

Smith: Well, it depends on the kind of being that is defined, I mean, it seems to me we require stronger evidence of proof of certain things than we do others, especially when something is so out of our context of ordinary experience. For example, it seems to me that if someone claims to have seen a man rise from the dead, we're going to require a fairly strong degree of proof to accept that assertion. I think the problem though, with theists as I have encountered them, is not in the area of proof, it's that they stumble at the first requirement which is providing some kind of coherent description if not a definition of what kind of being they have in mind when they describe God, a description that's not utterly unintelligible or at least that's not contradictory. And that's the problem I have, and in many cases when I ask what do you mean by God? I don't get any answer that makes much sense to me. They might as well say, "I believe in a blark!" It's a nonsense word in that sense in my mind.

Moderator: George, when we talk about your working definition that you don't see any evidence for God or sufficient evidence for God—I mean, there are shades of definitions here of agnostic and atheist, so you see loosely the term "atheist" to describe those that have never seen enough evidence for God.

Smith: We simply do not believe in a god, and I admittedly, since I'm using the term "god" I should provide at least a rough estimate of what I mean when I use the term. A god for me, generally speaking, has to be some kind of supernatural, or if you like, transcendent being. In my mind, I reject any naturalistic concept of God. In other words, if somebody says to me, "I believe that nature is God," I say, "Fine, but why call it God why not just call it nature?" So at least the minimum requirement has to be that it's some kind of being that transcends or falls outside the natural context of nature, falls outside natural law [unintelligible] that can perform miracles, do things that natural creatures cannot.

Moderator: But apparently by your presence here you're open to discuss it and if enough evidence were induced, you would be willing to modify your perspective.

Smith: Yeah, and I've been asked before the question what it would take to convince me. Well, not to be too flippant about it, but I suppose if in a Monty Python-like manner the clouds were to open and a giant hand were to come down from the clouds and grab me by the scruff of the neck and shake me and say, "I'm here, I'm here!"

Moderator: That would do it for most people.

Smith: Yeah, that would get me thinking.

Moderator: The reason I ask these is to try for my own understanding [to] determine whether you would fall into the category of what I would call a soft-boiled or a hard-boiled agnostic or somebody that is at least open to discuss it or if you've totally ruled out any possibility of God's existence.

Smith: Well, again until someone tells me what they mean by God, I can't answer that question. Do I rule out the possibility of life on other planets? I don't know. It depends on the arguments. So, in essence, I guess I'm open in principle. It's just that I've heard—I've been an atheist for many years now and involved myself in a lot of debates—and I think I've heard most of the arguments I'm going to hear, so somebody is going to have to come up with something new to convince me.

Moderator: Just one more point before I bring Greg Bahnsen into this, but in terms of background—and I don’t mean to get *ad hominem*—but did you have any type of religious training or academic training?

Smith: I was—would consider myself a fundamentalist Christian until about sophomore in high school. I was devoutly religious. I had many what I call religious experiences. My family was not especially religious, but I was. I prayed, I worked in church services; I got my [unintelligible] badge in Boy Scouts. I was a model Christian child . . . And, things happen. I discussed that in my latest book. There’s an essay called “My Path to Atheism” where I go through the de-conversion process, as I call it.

Moderator: When you say you were religious, did you consider a personal relationship with Jesus Christ part of what you had?

Smith: Yes, yes; I think so.

Moderator: Because some people would make a differentiation between a religion and a relationship.

Smith: Well, I was raised on Air Forces bases. The churches were technically non-denominational, but my experience was—I can’t say it was Baptist or any other particular theology—but I considered myself a Fundamentalist. I accepted what I considered to be a literal belief in the Bible, etc.

Moderator: Dr. Greg Bahnsen, in your doctorate from USC in epistemology and as a Christian theologian, of course, you have done many debates and written in the area of God’s existence. Where does one begin in presenting evidence for God? How would you approach George Smith for example?

Bahnsen: Well, [what] I appreciate about George—I really met him this afternoon—I appreciate about his writings that he understands how important epistemology is to the whole discussion. If we’re going to talk about the existence of God, we’re not going to want to reduce it to the question of emotion or just volitional commitment of some sort without man’s intellect being engaged, and I think he’s right about that. As Christians, we do not give up our intellect when we believe in God or follow the Scriptures, and so since the issue is epistemology, this may not be what your hearers would like to get into perhaps, but we need to talk about what amounts to proof and what amounts to knowledge and how these things are possible. I would say that we have to be extremely critical. I know that Christians often have the reputation for not being critically minded, and I think that’s probably a failing on our part when we’re like that.

But if we’re going to be critically minded, we need to examine the presuppositions of our thinking and we have to look at the worldview that we’re espousing when we argue in a particular way or not. And so, if I were talking with George over coffee, I think I would probably talk to him first of all about what outlook he has on the world. What does he conceive reality to be? How does he know what he knows? How should he live his life? And I would compare that to the Christian worldview, what we understand to be reality and how we know what we know and how we should live our lives, and then of course, we’re going to have to eventually get to the point of understanding how does one choose one worldview over another. At some point, maybe after two or three cups of coffee, I

would eventually challenge George that on an atheist worldview, the presuppositions of atheism do not provide a foundation for proving anything whatsoever. Therefore, in one sense, the strongest evidence and argument for the existence of God is that without a belief in God you can't prove anything. So, I would make that the foundation for reason.

Often, and I think you'll see this if you read George's book, you have people who present something of a Thomistic approach to faith and reason where faith fills in the gaps where reason lets us down or is inadequate. My own theological perspective is more Augustinian rather than Thomistic, and I would argue instead that everything we do engages the reason as a tool of man's intellect, but that the cogent use of reason is impossible apart from a foundation of faith. You see, I would preach that to my Christian brothers and sisters. They need to read the Scriptures and use their minds and not simply have an emotional Christianity. But that would also be the premise that I would approach an atheist or unbeliever with. I'd say that the best use of reason, in fact the only use of reason comes about when Christian faith is the foundation for it, or the worldview in terms of which you use your reason.

Moderator: But Greg, you wouldn't defer to faith as being some mystical faculty or credulity. You're talking about a belief based upon evidence, then.

Bahnsen: Yes, there have been plenty of Christians throughout history that have taken that mystical approach to faith. They've defined it as a second approach to knowledge apart from man's reason and so forth, but I think those are misguided. I would say that faith is essentially belief, and the reason we talk about faith and reason is because when we have faith it means we are trusting somebody else's expertise in some area. In that sense, the student at the university who first hears lectures about U.S. history or about logic, or what have you, begins to learn about these fields because he or she has faith in the instructors that they're giving them the straight scoop, and that sort of thing. Christians have faith in another person—I mean, not apart from that, but in addition—we have faith in the person of God himself revealed in the Scriptures. But I wouldn't say that that faith is apart from reason, I would say that engages the faculty of reason and it is in fact the foundation for the use of reason.

Moderator: So, would proper reasoning lead you to believe in the existence of God?

Bahnsen: I would argue that there isn't any proper reasoning apart from the foundation of belief in God. It's not so much that it leads to belief in God, as belief in God is the necessary pre-condition for using man's reason at all.

Moderator: Okay, George Smith, it sounds like there needs to be sort of *a priori* understanding here to arrive at the proper conclusions. How does that fit into your thinking?

Smith: Well, there were several issues that were raised. I don't really understand exactly what Greg means when he talks about belief in God as a precondition for reason. He might mean that to prove the validity of reason, but he just said in order to even reason, you can't even do that without a belief in God. I don't believe in a God, and yet I presumably reason; maybe not to everyone's satisfaction, but I nonetheless do reason. As far as this idea of faith and trust in another, you know, there's nothing wrong with that use of faith. It's been used that way for centuries, but if I take the word of someone else that I have not personally witnessed, I'm having faith in it. But that kind of faith presupposes that

you think the authority can't himself prove what he believes in. In other words, I may have "faith" in a physicist about some scientific experiment he's done. But that assumes that I believe the physicist himself is not acting from faith but himself can prove what he says. So, in that sense, I would say faith itself is dependent on the assumption that somebody, somewhere can prove what they're talking about.

I really don't understand this idea that reason itself, or to prove the validity of reason we must have faith. It seems to me we're talking about two entirely different things. And it seems to me that reason stands quite well on its own. I can talk about A is A, that is a self-evident truth. Where's the faith? I can talk about the table being in front of me, now if you want to say I have faith that the table is there, without getting into that sort of argument, I think that's absurd. I have direct physical contact with the table; it's quite obvious it's there. We have truths of mathematics. Where's the faith there? You can extend that out and out. There are degrees of proof and so forth, but it seems to me reason's quite capable of indicating itself.

Moderator: Well, let's do this—let's take a break. We'll come back and let Greg Bahnsen respond, because I want to talk about this area of evidence and where does faith fit in and where does evidence fit in, and what kind of evidence should we look for to come to the conclusion there is a God or that it's reasonable to believe in a supreme being. . . . Greg, let me go back to you and perhaps to respond to George's wondering: Does he lack reason because he doesn't begin with the premise of accepting God's existence . . . [?]

Bahnsen: Yeah, I'm glad that George replied the way that he did, because it allows for a clarification that I think we often overlook. We take it for granted if we've studied philosophy, but often people don't see that there's a difference between talking about how you account for something and then what you're able to do, whether you can account for it or not. I can have tuberculosis and not be able to give you any idea of the medical facts and dynamics of tuberculosis, so there's a difference between doing something and being able to account for that, or for having something true about you and you not being able to account for it.

I wouldn't suggest for a moment that George Smith doesn't reason. He does. He attempts to do that, and he attempts to do it consistently and so forth. But when he says to your audience, "I reason, but I don't have faith in God!" My response is, "No, you *do* have faith in God!" One of the problems is—and this is why God would be unhappy with your life, George—is because you don't give Him the credit that He deserves, you don't glorify Him, because your very ability to reason depends upon your knowledge of Him and submission to Him.

Now, of course, George doesn't outwardly worship God; he doesn't go to a Christian church; he doesn't profess faith in Christ; he doesn't believe the Bible and all sorts of things; and I take him very seriously about that. But my challenge to him as a philosopher and as a fellow human being would be that at a deeper level, he *does* know this God that I'm talking about. The Apostle Paul in Romans 1 describes this as suppressing the truth by means of unrighteousness, that people can know God and yet they don't outwardly profess it, and because they do know God, they are able to do things. They can balance their checkbooks, they can drive a car, they can make sense out of human relationships

and love, and they can reason. They are able to do that. But now are they able to give an account of that?

Cornelius Van Til, early 1980s. That's where we get back to the whole question of the atheist worldview and the Christian worldview. In terms of the atheist worldview, I would challenge George that he cannot give an account of the reasoning that he's doing. An example that a seminary professor once used that stuck with me for many years, Dr. [Cornelius] Van Til once said [Bahnsen paraphrases here.—A.F.], "There's no question that atheists count. Sometimes they count better than Christians. They can do their math very well. They do count, but they cannot account for their counting!"

That is, in terms of their outlook on the world, what they profess to be true about knowledge and about reality—you know, the universals and absolutes of mathematics—would not make any sense whatsoever. And so, I do agree that George does reason, but I would suggest that he cannot, in terms of his worldview, make sense of the reasoning that he engages in.

Moderator: Greg, just one clarification on that. Would that mean that all atheists are somehow unconscious theists?

Bahnsen: Yes, I may want a more sophisticated way of describing that than "unconscious," but that is generally what I'm suggesting here. It is that in their heart of hearts they do know God, and they are rebelling against that knowledge by their outward profession and the way in which they attempt even to put together a rational worldview or appeal to reason as George very well does. But you see, on his worldview there is no reason to appeal to.

I was thinking, if you don't mind George, my quoting from your book for a moment. I just took one sentence that I thought would be a good point of departure for a conversation with you. In the introduction to your *Atheism: The Case against God*, you say, "To advocate irrationality is to advocate that which is destructive to human life." I read that sentence and I agree with that! I think to advocate irrationality is a bad thing to do, that's not the way to go. I don't want Christians to understand faith in that way, and I agree with you that irrationality is destructive of human life.

Now here's the interesting counter to that: Why in an atheist worldview shouldn't a person be irrational? You might say, well, because it's destructive of human life! But the next question is, Well, why shouldn't I be destructive of human life if I were an atheist? Now, you know why *I* don't believe in being destructive of human life, the question is: why did *you* put that in your book? Why does it bother you to be destructive of human life?

Smith: Well, before I get into that, I'd like to address a couple other things you said. First of all, there's a little bit of conversion by definition going on here. This idea that atheists are really somehow unconscious crypto-theists has been around a long time. Walter Kaufmann in a very good book called *The Faith of a Heretic* talked about this problem, and pointed out that he was less than thrilled by the prospect that no matter how much you profess not to believe something, people say, "Well you know, you really do believe it! I might just as well say, 'I'm sure I could arrive at a theory to justify it that all

Christians are really just atheists underneath and just don't realize it, and once they put away their childish things they will realize they're atheists," and so forth. I don't think that gets us anywhere. I'm not a crypto-theist, and this business about justifying reasoning through faith in God strikes me as bizarre, because as an atheist once said, to explain the unknown by the known is a logical procedure; to explain the known by the unknown is a form of theological lunacy.

I'm very familiar with the precepts of reasoning and rules of logic, etc. We don't need to derive faith in to explain these or how we're able to do them. That's, by the way, how we're able to do it. That's more of a biological issue, an issue of evolution—the nature of consciousness and so forth. But to be more specific, it seems to me even if there is a problem there, to say God is responsible, well we're dealing with this mysterious, vague notion of a God and we're going to have faith in this thing and how did God bring all this about. In other words, it seems to me that we're dealing with something relatively simple and straightforward and can be dealt with through reason and philosophy. And the theologian comes along and says, "I'm going to explain everything, and I'm going to explain it by positing an unknowable being who does things using some unknowable means and—There, that clears up the problem!" That for me simply compounds the problem. On top of the philosophical problems, we already have, we're adding this whole theological scene now which also has to be explained. So, I simply disagree. Now, do you want me to address your . . .

Moderator: The destruction of human life. I'm interested in that as well. Why should it matter? If people are irrational and that leads to the destruction of human life—I mean, from an atheistic perspective, so what?

Smith: You're getting into the issue of ethics, and [in] that very same book I have a quarter that deals with a question of that. Now let me first say one thing. I'm not alone on this. Now, I know that Greg says he's more from an Augustinian tradition rather than a Thomistic tradition, but philosophers in the Thomistic tradition—and not just Catholics, those from that general background—they themselves admit that reason can discover certain precepts of natural law unaided by revelation, that God created the universe in a certain way, and this is called natural revelation. The deistic movement of the 18th and late 17th century talked about this. As Greg well knows, there are different traditions here. Unlike Augustine, Aquinas held that although he believed in original sin, he did not hold his argument that original sin had corrupted man's reasoning ability to the extent that Augustine had. So, he argued that even with original sin it was still possible for human beings through the use of reason to discern certain natural laws. Now certainly he thought they had to be aided and supplemented by revelation, but he held that reason was efficacious in that respect.

So, the atheist is not alone in holding that the precepts of morality, and if you understand what I mean by natural law ethics that's traditionally what it's been called. The use of reason, investigating the nature of human beings, the nature of the environment in which we find ourselves, the nature of decision making, you can arrive at general principles on how to live a good life. Now, as to the question: why should we care? Well, that's a legitimate question. I care because for me happiness is a goal in itself. A good life is a goal in itself. I could put the same question to the Christian. Suppose God does exist, why

should we care? Because he tells us to care? Why kind of basis is this for ethics? I mean, it puzzles me.

It seems that a philosopher has to be concerned with rational arguments for an ethical system. Along comes the Christian and says, “I have a basis for ethics. God will punish you if you do this, and he’ll reward you if you do that!” That sounds to me like a system of commandments. Either you do this or you don’t. Where’s the reason there? Is it right only because God wills it, or does God will it because it’s right? That’s a classic question. Is murder wrong only because God says it’s wrong? If God tomorrow changed his mind and said, “Thou shalt go out and murder,” would that make murder right? Or does God forbid murder because murder is intrinsically wrong? It seems to me the Christian is caught on the horns of a dilemma. Either he has to take a hard line—it’s wrong because God wills it to be wrong, in which case morality is reduced to a set of arbitrary decrees with no reason behind them—or he has to say that God himself forbids certain things because they are simply wrong. In which case there’s a standard of morality apart from the will of God.

Moderator: Okay, let’s hold it there, a lot on the table. We’ll take a break and let Greg Bahnsen respond. . . . Greg, to address what George has just raised, why don’t you respond to him perhaps and people just tuning in, they can figure out what’s going on here.

Bahnsen: Yeah, let me kind of catch the audience up here. I have suggested that Christians do not renounce the use of reason, but I actually argue that reason cannot be intelligently utilized apart from a Christian worldview and that, therefore, when we find atheists like George Smith trying to be reasonable using criteria for intelligibility and so forth, they are in fact acting like crypto-Christians. That is, they’re working in terms of a Christian worldview all the while denying what they know about God in their heart of hearts.

George has responded to that, and I can understand why he would. Well, that may be just kind of a version of name-calling. It’s like you say you’re an atheist, but I say you’re really not. And I can respond by when you say you’re a Christian, I say you’re an atheist. But you see, that is not the nature of the claim here. If George believes that this is a reversible claim, then, of course, we need to engage in some rational combat here and talk about that. I would argue that the reason I say that he really does know God in his heart of hearts is because he gives evidence of depending upon the Christian worldview even when he reasons against the Christian worldview.

I’m not going to do that right this minute, but so you have some idea of what I’m talking about: if George appeals to moral absolutes, I’m going to say, “Well, that’s the sort of thing that Christians do that makes sense if there’s a God. But the moral absolutes you appeal to in order to renounce belief in God—it doesn’t make any sense in your worldview.” I think [that’s also the case] when you appeal to the use of scientific method and you assume the uniformity of nature; but, of course, on an atheist worldview you can’t make sense out of the uniformity of nature. Those are the sorts of things that we would end up talking about if I were going to show that, as a matter of fact, even his use of reason and moral argumentation presupposes what he’s arguing against.

Let’s bring this back to our conversation. He has suggested, “Oh, well I could argue just

the opposite with you, that as a matter of fact what you're doing presupposes atheism." To I would simply say, "George, name that tune. Go ahead, if you think that you can show that I'm presupposing atheism. I'd like to see the argument for that!" Because I wasn't just making an empty authority claim when I said you're presupposing the Christian worldview. I'm going to give you evidence that you're presupposing, and I'm going to show that you can't make sense of your reasoning and morality apart from it. What you need to do now is to show that I can't make sense of my Christian morality apart from the non-existence of God. That doesn't strike me as a very likely prospect for a philosopher to get to that conclusion, but I'd be open to that. It's not a matter of name-calling and reversing authority claims here when we talk about the pre-conditions of intelligibility.

When it comes to morality, I need to move on quickly here. George has commented that even certain Christian theologians have said that natural law is a basis for a natural knowledge of at least some moral precepts, maybe not all that we need, but some fundamental ones. And to him I would simply say I would argue against those Christian theologians as much as I would argue against him that natural law is not in fact a source for moral absolutes, that one cannot argue that from what is the case even the natural regularities that we see about us to what ought to be the case. You can't move from a description of the world that we live in and our experience to the way things ought to be. So, he is right that some Christian traditions would be closer to him, but my severe challenge to the atheist would remain, and I'd say I'd put the theologians who argue from natural law right over there too; I'd say, "Let's see if you can justify ethics based on that any better than George can!" I don't think they can.

Now is punishment the basis for Christian ethics? Suggestion was made that we believe that, say, murder is wrong because God has said so, and he'll punish us if we don't agree. But that, of course, is not the Christian position at all. Did God forbid murder arbitrarily? This is the issue of voluntarism in theology. The old conundrum from the days of Plato has supposedly been, well if God does this simply on the basis of his sheer volition, he just wills murder to be wrong, then of course tomorrow he could will murder to be right. On the other hand, if God has some reason for willing murder to be wrong, then, of course, you don't need God in order to believe that murder is wrong, because the reason God has would be the basis. But what that overlooks completely from a Christian standpoint is God forbids murder because it's contrary to his own unchanging character. God's volition, that is to say his expressed will, saying "Thou shalt not murder" is based upon who he is—the kind of God he is and that is unchanging. So, the character of God is the basis of Christian morality, not simply the revelation of God or threats of eternal punishment if we should be murderers and so forth.

When George says that happiness is a goal in itself, see I would throw the voluntarist problem back on him at that point and say, "Well, George, even assuming—and I don't think this is correct, but just for argument's sake—that on the basis of happiness as your *telos* or goal for living that you could make sense of why you don't murder or why you try to be reasonable. I would still challenge you: why can't another individual freely say, "Well, I don't want to live for happiness, and I don't want to live for life-affirming

values, and so forth? That is, in an atheist universe there would be no absolutes at all. It would be everyone for themselves or, as Shakespeare put it: “Sound and fury signifying nothing.”

Moderator: George?

Smith: Okay, a lot of stuff here; I’ll try to be brief. First of all, there’s confusion here, and this goes back to Greg’s original point. There is no “atheistic worldview,” let’s get straight about that. Atheism is simply the absence of belief in God. It does not by itself suggest or dictate any positive philosophy. There are a lot of atheists with a lot of different worldviews.

Suppose, for example, that I don’t believe in magic elves, which I don’t, and let’s call my disbelief elfism. It’s as if Greg would say, “Well, elfism as a worldview doesn’t explain anything.” I agree, it doesn’t, it wasn’t meant to explain anything. It’s the absence of a belief. I’m the first to admit that lacking a belief doesn’t explain anything. It’s the role of philosophy, after you’re an atheist, to construct a positive philosophy which may have no intrinsic relationship to your atheism, *per se*. There are atheist existentialists, atheist Marxists, atheist advocates of Ayn Rand’s objectivism. Atheism is again not a worldview, and that’s the basic confusion here.

In that sense, I suppose the Christian worldview does explain more than the atheistic worldview—simply because even if the Christian worldview explains one thing it’s got it over atheism, because atheism isn’t a worldview and it wasn’t meant to explain anything. So, in that sense, I agree.

As for this stuff about God’s unchanging character, let me just address the ethics thing. The problem with this is that it would take a lot of airtime and a lot of discussion to sit here and discuss the rational foundations of ethics, but I’d rather address one of the points first. This idea that somehow implicitly I show evidence of having a belief in God.

Did Christianity invent these things? Was Aristotle somehow a Christian at heart even centuries before the time of Jesus? My view is Aristotelian, if it’s anything, and unless we’re going to argue that these pagan philosophers—by the way, that was an interesting question addressed by the early Greek apologists: to what extent the pagan or the Greek philosophers could’ve had true knowledge without knowledge of Christ. They argued, kind of, that some of the Greek philosophers had gotten their wisdom from Moses, and they went around in circles trying to justify how anyone who obviously were not Christians—because it was before the time of Christianity—could’ve received true knowledge. So, I don’t really know how to respond to that exactly. It seems to me that it’s just playing word games, essentially.

There’s nothing implicitly theistic about me saying A is A. To take a very simple example: why does that evidence lead to belief in God? “A is A” is a self-evident truth, the existence of God certainly isn’t. It seems to me that “A is A” is much more evident than the existence of God is. Again, I don’t see any reason there to suppose that we need to believe in God.

Bahnsen: Well, let me suggest first of all that you're right that there is no one atheist worldview in the sense that all atheists agree with each other about epistemology, and ethics, and metaphysics. I was being general when [I] talked about the atheist worldview. But to state it more precisely, all we're saying is [that] no particular atheist worldview can make sense out of reason, ethics, the sorts of things that are necessary for human life, to make sense out of life. So, if you want to talk about existentialism, then we'll take time to talk to do that, if you want to talk about Aristotle, we'll take time to do that.

What I'm saying is in each and every single case, those who reject the worldview that I'm describing as Biblical Christianity are not able to make sense out of proof and science and ethics and so forth. Atheism is not a generic name for a positive worldview, but there is no positive atheistic worldview where reason is even a necessity much less something that can be made sense out of.

Now, when George ends his last answer by saying, "A is A' is self-evident," what I would say is: go back and study logic. I mean, the law of identity has been rejected by some people. There are some worldviews, atheistic non-Christian worldviews that don't agree—but now, look, I *do* agree with the law of identity, I believe in logic and so forth—but, you see, I believe that I can make sense out of that because I am a Christian. But in a non-Christian worldview, there really isn't a reason why we couldn't deny the law of identity or come up with other kinds of what we might (I think you and I would agree) would be contradictory approaches to logic, but nevertheless are called logic in some worldviews.

Moderator: [Unintelligible] to jump in we'll take a break and come right back. . . . Before we go to the phones, Greg Bahnsen you were sort of on a roll there, and I think I cut you off prematurely. What were you about to say?

Bahnsen: Well, I wanted to respond quickly to George's good question: Was Aristotle a Christian at heart? I'm going to bite the bullet and say, yes, he was. I don't mean by that, of course, anything like what the early Christians struggled with, whether Aristotle or Plato had learned about Moses and through Moses and so forth. We as Christians believe God has revealed himself in the natural order and through the conscience of man. We believe that all men know this God even if they haven't had a Biblical revelation of him, so in that sense, Aristotle had a Christian worldview in his heart of hearts, even if he didn't know about Moses or Christ for that matter. In the same way that an Old Testament Jew would've been able to make sense out of reason and ethics and science because of the worldview provided to him by God in revelation.

In George's book, I noticed something again that I appreciated very much when he said that it's the responsibility of the philosopher to identify the underlying assumptions of commonly held beliefs. I think on that note, he and I could have a very fruitful discussion trying to identify the underlying assumptions, say, of the scientific method, and if I can just throw that one out—I'd like to know how George would deal with this. We know that those who engage in the scientific method are able to extrapolate knowledge from the past into the future by assuming what's called induction. That is, that future cases will be like past cases or in popular [unintelligible] the uniformity of nature.

Now, I know George believes in the procedures of science; I do too, as a Christian. The reason why I would rely upon the principle of induction is because I believe in a sovereign God who controls the universe. But it would be interesting to know what underlying assumption George has when he engages in the same scientific procedure as me. Is he using induction as a principle and, if so, why? Is that arbitrary?

Moderator: George?

Smith: Well, the underlying assumption is that a thing is what it is. An existing thing has specific characteristics, and it's restricted to the range of behavior or action as defined by those characteristics. A cat will not give birth to baby elephants.

Bahnsen: Why not?

Smith: Because that's the nature of the cat.

Bahnsen: Well, that's begging the question, to say it's the nature of the cat.

Smith: But you say that it's the nature of God all the time. I can say it's the nature of the cat.

Bahnsen: No, actually I'm not just saying it's the nature of God. I'm saying God reveals himself to people . . .

Smith: I'm saying my view of causation is that causation is essentially the law of identity applied to action. Things act as they do because they have specific, determinate characteristics and the [unintelligible] the physical or whatever nature of an existing thing determines the nature of the actions that that thing can take. So, when one billiard ball strikes another billiard ball, the nature of the billiard ball is the nature of the motion, determines what the causal result will be. That's why we get down to the law of identity. There's regularity in nature because things are existing, determinate things with specific characteristics.

Bahnsen: Well, it's a tremendous philosophical mistake to assimilate the law of causality to the laws of logic, but if you study the history of philosophy, you'd know that this idea that things have a determinate nature and that's why they behave the way they do is associated with the conclusion that there can be no change, that is, it's impossible for things to change, well, because the law of identity prevents things from changing. So, now I would continue the discussion. Let's look at our underlying assumptions. How is it possible to extrapolate into the future, if you use the law of identity—there's no change to look for in the future.

Smith: Well, let's assume that I'm wrong. I could refer you to books: H. W. B Joseph's book on logic. Maybe you'd consider it outdated. Brand Blanshard held a very similar view. . . . Richard Taylor holds a similar view. Okay, but let's assume that they're all wrong and it's a minority view on the nature of causation. Granted. But at least I'm trying to reach an explanation within the sphere of reason. In other words, it seems to me that my explanation, even if you don't accept it, makes a lot more sense than saying God does it. I mean, to me that explains nothing. If you'd like to quote another line from my book, quote the line where I said: the concept of God explains nothing. When you've been talking to me about how can we explain this, how can we make sense of this. Okay, I'm attempting to give an explanation and maybe an incorrect one, but it is within the realm of human understanding. I would challenge you to tell me how God explains anything.

Let's assume there is a problem. . . let's make sense out of it: "A Blark did it." That's all I say. I would say to you Greg, "You know, Greg, you really couldn't reason if it weren't for the existence of a Blark! You'd be a little bit puzzled . . . if we're going to talk about explanation, right or wrong it has to be in the realm of human understanding and human reason. If you simply plug in the word "Blark," or in your case the word "God," whenever you encounter a problem, it doesn't solve the problem. That is my fundamental point.

Bahnsen: I understand. The fallacy here is the false analogy that when a person appeals to God he's appealing to an undefined word like "Blark."

Smith: But you haven't defined it.

Bahnsen: Well, I'd be glad to do, though. We can open up the Bible; we can look to the Westminster Confession of Faith for a definition of God. I don't think you have any doubt that Christians have a definition of God.

Smith: They have many definitions of God.

Bahnsen: They do, and we're going to deal with the one that I hold to because I'm the one arguing today.

Smith: Good point.

Bahnsen: Does appealing to God explain anything? Well, of course when you ask philosophically: what is an explanation? The answer is, of course, it does. It may strike you as being as easy as a Sunday school child's understanding, but if I've got a Heavenly Father who created the entire universe and controls every detail, even to the hairs on my head, and I say of this creative personality who has this sovereign might and plan that he sees to it that gravity holds on planet Earth day by day by day—that does in fact explain it, but it may not be the explanation that you want. I'm just talking about now what counts as an explanation. An explanation is something which enables you to predict the future and to account for why you predict it that way.

Moderator: . . . Taking your phone calls let's go to Benny a first-time caller from Hawaiian Gardens. Benny you're on KKLA.

Benny: Hi John. My question is for Mr. Smith, and what I'd like to ask him is, where does he believe life started or came from?

Smith: Okay, that question can be taken one of two ways, as a philosophical question or as a scientific question. I'm not a scientist, so my scientific answer—I don't know. By the way, if I can mention a book called *The Blind Watchmaker* by Richard Dawkins, which I think is one of the best books I've seen, directly addressing his creationist argument, and I think it's a very plausible book for people who might be skeptical about evolution. But it seems to me what the caller might be getting at is the philosophical problem of the origin of life. Without going into all the problems there and by the way Dawkins does address them, let me say that philosophically, life is just one natural aspect of the universe that seems to have evolved and seems to be rather unusual as far as we know among planets, but I don't think there's any philosophical problem involved.

Moderator: Is there any concern about first cause that you need to get into from your perspective, George?

Smith: Well, no, I mean, again it depends when you're asking me philosophically or scientifically. Philosophically, I don't think the first cause argument holds up. The so-called argument from life doesn't hold up as a philosophical point. There are other objections to these arguments, but it seems to me one of the prime objections, one of the most commonly raised, is that the argument always has to go back one step further. If everything must have a cause and we wish the conclusion that therefore God doesn't have a cause, or that seems to be part of the argument, well, if everything has to have a cause, then God has to have a cause.

Moderator: Unless there's an infinite regress. Greg Bahnsen, how would you address what Benny has asked here about life?

Bahnsen: Well, I think Benny's question's a very good one. See, I would follow it up, George, by asking: Is it your belief that life came from non-life, or is it your belief that life is, I think you were saying, part of the characteristics of reality or the universe in which case there always has been life—it never did have to come into being, it's always been in being.

Secondly . . . I think the question of first cause arguments has not been adequately dealt with if you only talk about the overly general approach to the cosmological argument that says everything has to have a cause, and then the question naturally is: Does God have to have a cause? A more profound question is: What do we presuppose when we use the concept of causality? This is going to be a repeat of what George has heard earlier. I would argue that when people use the causal notion or the inductive principle, they are presupposing a Christian view of the universe; that's what makes science possible. So, I wouldn't argue that you go from cause back to cause back to cause and finally get to God. That's a very, I think, primitive understanding of the argument, but I think the very notion of causality presupposes the Christian God, as well. But back to life. Does life come from non-life?

Smith: That's a scientific question, and I don't know. My best guess would be that it would be the complex protein molecules that go into the building blocks of life probably did come out of synthesizing processes, and so forth. Dawkins goes into that, but again, that's a scientific, not a philosophical question.

Bahnsen: But I do think it illustrates something that's very important for your hearers to know, John: atheists are full of what we might call "faith commitments" as Christians are. Clearly, they are different commitments, but you have George here saying that he's willing to acknowledge the possibility of life coming from non-life. The next question would be—

Smith: I said I don't know.

Bahnsen: He doesn't know, but I mean after all we have to have some view of life when we talk about it. There's an empty faith-commitment here about life, it seems to me, when you say you don't know. Maybe it did come from non-life—that irrational possibility exists. Did intelligence come from non-intelligence? Did morality come from non-morality? There are always these leaps and gaps in the non-Christian worldview that obviously in two minutes we're not going to get to the bottom of, but they're worth exploring, so I'm glad Benny asked that question.

Moderator: Okay, Benny, I appreciate the call. Let's go to Jared a first-time caller from Costa Mesa. Jared, you're on KKLA.

Jared: Hi John. My question is for George. The name of his book is . . . what?

Moderator: *Atheism: The Case Against God*. That's his first book, and his second book is *Atheism, Ayn Rand, and Other Heresies*.

Jared: Okay, speaking about what everybody's talking about today with evidence, the Bible being our evidence with the appearance to Moses, the history of prophecy and how they came true, the claims and miracles of Christ, and the eyewitness resurrection of Christ. We have evidence, but yet I haven't heard any evidence from Mr. Smith of a claim of no evidence against God, the belief in God, or the existence of God.

Smith: As I said at the beginning of the program, the atheist is not obliged to prove anything. Atheism is simply the lack of belief. If you do not believe in the existence of magic elves, it is not incumbent on you to prove that they don't exist or to give reasons why you don't believe. If I come forward to you and say, "I just saw a magic elf running across the room and disappear in a puff of smoke!" and challenge you to disprove it and [ask you] why don't you believe it, you simply say, "If you want me to believe it, prove it, or give me some reason to think that it wasn't just a figment of your imagination."

Bahnsen: I think in the history of the vocabulary of atheism, agnosticism and so forth, that it would be a fair remark—I have no jealousy for the words; who cares about the words—but I do think that "atheism" has not meant what George is portraying. I mean that's closer to what we've been calling agnosticism. But it is interesting to me—and I think your caller is on to something that I wondered about too as I looked at George's book—it's subtitled *The Case Against God*. He's not saying that there's no case for God, which is the only thing he's done this afternoon is to say, "Well, you know the burden of proof is on you!" But when you write a book, George, against God, I think you do bear the burden of some proof to show why we should be against and not just neutral on the question.

Smith: Yes, and that's what the 327 pages are about.

Moderator: Okay, we'll leave it at that. I appreciate the call, Jared. We'll take a break and take more of your phone calls. Stay with us.

Moderator: . . . Before we go back to the phones, George, you wanted to give more or less your definition of atheism.

Smith: Well, I've already given it, but Greg raised a point, which is a very common misconception that somehow defining atheism as the absence of belief as opposed to what's called the positive definition, the outright denial, etc., the idiosyncratic definition. In fact, it's not. In my recent book I have an entire [unintelligible] called defining atheism, and I present just as examples, twelve to fifteen or more prominent atheists who for the last 200 years have defined atheism in precisely that manner, along with a number of prominent theologians: Richard Watson, around the mid 1800's, Robert Flint, in a very important book on agnosticism, who was a Christian, who simply said atheism is the lack or the absence of belief in God. My point is that we should look to what atheists have been arguing for many years and what they themselves claimed to have been saying, not to critics who tell us what they should have said.

Moderator: Okay, let's go back to the phones. Max, a first-time caller from Canoga Park, who I think I've heard from before. Max, you're on KKLA.

Max: Howdy-doo! George?

Smith: Yes?

Max: I've got your book, and it's dog-eared and underlined and highlighted all over the place. I think it's the best book that has ever been written on atheism.

Smith: Thank you.

Max: But the title should really be *Atheism: The Case Against the Idea of God*

Smith: Yes.

Max: And that's what you meant?

Smith: Yeah, there was a little dramatic license taken that would have spoiled the symmetry of the title. So, it's a philosophical case against God, obviously.

Max: And as to this explaining things, how does one explain existence? To me that is totally absurd.

Smith: I agree. Existence is simply the causal primary. In other words, if you ask for a causal explanation of something, that presupposes something that exists and acts as a causal agent.

Max: Exactly, and all of the arguments for the existence of God presuppose the existence of God. It's question-begging.

Bahnsen: There's no problem with that.

Moderator: Hold on Max. Let Greg Bahnsen respond to that.

Bahnsen: Yeah, I think that is one of the most common and silly arguments against the Christian apologetic imaginable. Of course, arguments in favor of God presuppose the existence of God, just like arguments in favor of atheistic reason presuppose atheistic reason.

Max: Wait a minute, wait a minute, Sir. Wait a minute, just one minute. There is no reason to presuppose reason. Reason exists naturally. Without reason we wouldn't be able to . . .

Bahnsen: Oh, it does? Now wait a minute, where did you find reason growing naturally? Show me where that is. Someone place in the United States?

Max: Reason? Reason is the human brain, Sir.

Bahnsen: Oh, it is? Then what you're talking about is electrochemical processes in the brain.

Max: Is that not natural?

Bahnsen: Well, that certainly is natural, but that's not at all what you mean by reason, I assure you, when you talk about the use of the laws of logic, because your brain cells are not being controlled by anything like the laws of logic.

Max: What are my cells being controlled by?

Bahnsen: Well, I would argue they're being controlled by God, but that's not the answer you want. The question that I have for you is: if you assume the laws of physics and biology

and so forth, I would think that you believe your brain cells are being controlled by those laws and in which case you're not really thinking and making free decisions when you say the things you do, even arguing against God. You're simply the subject of biochemical responses. That is not what we have meant historically by the use of reason.

Max: Sir, as to controlling things by natural laws, natural laws are nothing more than uniform occurrences that do happen with unvarying uniformity.

Bahnsen: Max, have you ever seen a natural law? Have you ever tasted one, smelled one—

Max: Of course not! The entire concept of a law is totally abstract.

Bahnsen: Exactly. Now can you explain to me how in an atheist universe there are such things as abstract entities?

Max: Come on! Every idea, every thought is an abstraction.

Bahnsen: That's right; every one of them is proof that you're wrong as an atheist, then. How do you account for the existence of abstract ideas in an atheist universe? They don't grow on trees, Max. You've already admitted that.

Max: Oh boy . . . oh boy.

Bahnsen: Well, now. Look, live by your own presuppositions. That's all I'm calling you to do.

Smith: Is God an abstraction, Greg?

Bahnsen: Uh, no.

Smith: What is he?

Bahnsen: God is a personal, non-physical being.

Smith: He's non-physical. Give me more specifics, I mean. Non-existence is non-physical as well, so how do we distinguish God from non-existence?

Max: I'm going to hang up, George; make him explain God.

Smith: I'm doing my best, Max.

Moderator: Max, appreciate the call. Okay, go ahead.

Bahnsen: Well, obviously you distinguish God, a non-physical being from, say, the concept of love or say, the concept of number or the laws of physics or the laws of logic. You distinguish them according to their characteristics. God is a person, makes choices and does things. Numbers do not.

Smith: He's a non-physical person?

Bahnsen: He's a non-physical person, that's right. Well, you know that already, George, so make your point.

Smith: Well, I don't understand what the concept of person—and it was as Max said, you're getting on his case about these abstractions and you're claiming God somehow—

Bahnsen: Oh, I don't have any problem with abstractions except in an atheist universe. In an atheist universe what you have is a physical eyeball and a physical ear and some kind of stuff in the head called a brain. What I want to know is where do you get abstractions?

Smith: Well, see, you're going from the unknown to the known.

Bahnsen: No, I'm not. I'm going from the known to the known.

Smith: However, you think abstractions originate or where they come from or how we explain them, I think we can agree we do abstract and we do think conceptually. We know that.

Bahnsen: The fact that we abstract is not the issue here. It's accounting for abstractions, which you can't do.

Smith: But we can agree at least to begin with that even though I do not disagree. There are—abstractions do exist.

Bahnsen: In my universe it makes sense; in yours it doesn't.

Smith: So, at least we can agree, I know what an abstraction is, roughly, let's say. Now, you claim that abstractions need some sort of explanation, and I say "Greg, what's your explanation for abstractions?" And you say, "It's a personal, non-physical person."

Bahnsen: No, I think you've mistaken me. You asked what God was, and I answered that. I think we both know what an abstraction is. I didn't ask for an explanation of an abstraction, as though you've got to give me some sort of causal story of where the abstraction came from. I asked for how abstractions make sense, are cogent, within a worldview where there is nothing but matter.

Moderator: Okay, gentlemen, why don't we hold that thought. . . . Let's go to Tina, first time caller from Covina. Tina, you're on KKLA.

Tina: Hi John, my question is to George: I was wondering, has he studied the Bible?

Moderator: That's the question?

Tina: Yes, well that's part of the question.

Moderator: Well, what's the whole question?

Tina: My whole question, oh well, it's a tough one. . . . I was wondering what his conclusion is of what he has studied.

Moderator: What does he think about the Bible, does it contain truth?

Smith: Well, when I was in high school, the thing that started getting me very skeptical was when I read the Bible from cover to cover for the first time because, like many devout Christians, I never read the whole thing. I had read pre-selected excerpts primarily from the New Testament from the Gospel of John. And, I must say, the Old Testament centralizing on the violence, the ceremonial laws—I wouldn't say they swayed me from Christianity, but it got me thinking. [I] went into my neighborhood gospel supply, bought the Abingdon Bible Commentary, started buying the Interpreter's Bible commentaries, Bible dictionaries, concordances . . . so in that sense—that was years ago—but yes, I studied the Bible, and I don't believe everything I read. That's my reaction to it. It has some very nice—I must say, literarily speaking, the book of Ecclesiastes is beautifully written in the King James Version [and] Song of Solomon. So, as literature some of it is quite nice.

Moderator: But as far as being the source of truth?

Smith: Well, I mean there are some decent things in the Bible, sure. There are some elegantly expressed moral maxims, that sort of thing. It's a collection of books, not one book. Some of it I like; some of it I don't.

Moderator: Greg Bahnsen, quick response to Tina.

Bahnsen: Well, I think her question was really a personal and biographical one for George, and I understand his answer. Maybe I'd say just in favor of the ceremonial laws of the Old Testament, which are often a stumbling point for reading. But in a sense, if you read them as foreshadows of the coming Savior, there's really a lot of beauty in most ceremonial laws: God displaying outwardly to his people what the Messiah and his redemptive work would be like.

Smith: Well, in the King James Version in the Song of Solomon there are some of the more erotically expressed passages and if you look at the running headings, they say things like "Christ Expresses His Love to the Church"—I had a hard time buying [that *that's*] what the Song of Solomon was really about.

Bahnsen: I do, too, George.

Moderator: Of course, a lot of those are *post hoc* understandings of the Bible that not everyone accepts. I appreciate my guests joining us. George Smith, your books *Atheism: The Case Against God*, *Atheism*, *Ayn Rand*, and *Other Heresies*, those are available in bookstores, published by Prometheus. . . . Well, Greg and George, I appreciate both of you joining us and I think it was a very interesting, lively discussion. Thanks so much.

Bahnsen: Thanks, John.